

Youth Partnership

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“Journeys to a New Life: Understanding the role of youth work in integrating young refugees in Europe”
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Integrating young refugees in Europe: Tandem – a case study

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“It’s been the most beautiful time since arriving in Belgium because I felt alive again. This placement helped me to break the isolation that refugees in the asylum centres face. Meeting Europeans and feeling connected with them is so important.”
Monaf Alkalaani, 25, from Syria.

Introduction

The Tandem volunteering initiative is designed to support the integration of refugees and asylum-seekers in Brussels by creating opportunities for them to bring their skills and experience to European-level NGOs via short-term volunteer placements.

Launched on 20 June 2016 – World Refugee Day – Tandem is a community association, co-led by refugees and by individuals with a background in EU-level civil society. This ethic of cooperation is central to how Tandem functions and lies at the heart of its objectives.

In simple terms, Tandem works by matching refugees/asylum-seekers as volunteers with non-profit organisations¹ in Brussels. Potential volunteers register with the initiative via www.tandemvolunteering.org, providing basic information on their skills and experience; meanwhile, organisations sign up and outline provisional tasks and dates for a proposed placement. Based on the information provided, the Tandem team identifies a suitable volunteer for each placement, and facilitates the preparations. While Tandem provides administrative and legal guidance (e.g. a standard volunteer agreement, and possible volunteer insurance coverage), the volunteer and the host organisation are encouraged to work directly together to shape the placement in advance, and agree, for example, on the specific work and objectives. Each hosting organisation is requested to offer an initial full-time placement of two-weeks duration, and provide the volunteer with 25EUR per day as a volunteer allowance.

Once an agreement is finalised, members of the Tandem team monitor the placement and provide support to both parties throughout, following up with an evaluation of the work together.

Background

Tandem was originally developed in response to the situation facing individual asylum-seekers and refugees residing in a reception centre in Berchem-Sainte-Agathe, in west Brussels. Aside from language classes, many individuals had no regular activities to give structure to their day, despite a common desire to work and

1 Under Belgian law, only non-profit organisations and public institutions can engage volunteers.

to be active. With a limited, or non-existent social network outside the centre, and limited financial resources, the avenues to access job opportunities were similarly few.² Worried about the signs of clinical depression that many were displaying, a Syrian doctor who had formerly been resident at the centre teamed up with his Flemish language teacher to consider solutions that could quickly be put into action. They approached friends working in EU-level civil society organisations in Brussels, and together created the Tandem initiative. Legal advice and guidance on developing the initiative was provided by Het Punt (the Flemish volunteering agency in Brussels) and the European Volunteering Centre, the latter also hosting the first Tandem volunteer.

Aims

For *individuals*, Tandem aims to:

- offer them opportunities to re-use their professional/academic skills, widen their social networks in Brussels by engaging with new people, and potentially make strategic contacts to support their path into employment.
- support the restoration of their autonomy and dignity through the opportunities provided and enable them to participate more actively in Belgian society.
- alleviate the financial uncertainty they may be experiencing, through the provision of a small, legally authorised volunteer allowance.³
- support their capacity to be potential change-makers in their communities and countries of origin/transit, through their engagement with civil society organisations.

For *hosting organisations*, Tandem aims to:

- support and facilitate their role in contributing to refugee integration at the local level, in a structured manner.
- introduce new perspectives to their work through the direct input and engagement of a volunteer – e.g. a Tandem volunteer might enable the organisation to develop links with their country of origin, to support research work.
- increase their short-term capacity, e.g. in preparation of an event or external publication.

The story so far

Tandem was initially launched via a Facebook page, and began as a zero-budget initiative. It is itself run by volunteers, with a core team of six coordinating day-to-day work. At the time of writing, 29 placements had been secured (18 completed; 11 in preparation or progress). Hosting organisations have so far ranged from the European Youth Forum, ActionAid, and Oxfam Magazines du Monde, to the International Commission of Jurists, ILGA-Europe and the economics think-tank Bruegel.

Outreach to potential volunteers is undertaken by two members of the team who are themselves refugees, and is done primarily through refugee-specific networks on social media, and by word of mouth. By 7 November 2016, 90 individuals had signed up with Tandem (comprised of 14 asylum-seekers, 75 refugees, and 1 individual in Belgium through family reunification), the majority of whom come from Syria and Iraq, reflecting the countries of origin of the two highest groups of asylum-seekers in Belgium in 2015.⁴

Though Tandem is not specifically focused on young people, in practice, the average age of both potential and placed volunteers is 28.⁵ The methods being used to reach out to refugees (i.e. social media) as well as the age spread of recent arrivals in Belgium, may be key factors here. Similarly, outreach is being done in English specifically to reach individuals with at least a working level of English (see more below).

2 Recognised refugees have the legal right to work in Belgium, as do asylum-seekers who have not received a definitive decision on their application after four months.

3 In Belgium, all refugees and asylum-seekers living in reception centres (those with a right to 'material assistance') currently receive a daily allowance of 1 EUR per day for all their costs outside the reception centre.

4 From Belgium Asylum Statistics Survey 2015 from the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (see <http://www.cgra.be/en/news/asylum-statistics-survey-2015>).

5 Individuals registered with Tandem range in age from 19-42 years old.

In order to secure offers to host volunteers and to promote the work of the initiative, presentations and information sessions are regularly organised for NGOs in Brussels. To date 25 organisations have signed up or signalled definitive interest as hosts, with discussions currently ongoing with over 20 more.

Tandem principally targets EU-level civil society for two key reasons: firstly, given the background of members of the team, many of whom work or have worked in Brussels-based NGOs: as such, this is a constituency they know, and in which they maintain wide, professional networks. In order to ensure Tandem could be set up and be functioning quickly, addressing this target audience was a self-evident choice.

Secondly, the so-called ‘Brussels bubble’ comprises a large migrant population, albeit a more privileged one in terms of immediate social and financial capital. Enabling this community to encounter refugees/asylum-seekers and together explore and learn from common challenges and common experiences remains a key element of Tandem’s ethos.

Tandem sessions

Sessions are organised on a monthly basis to give potential volunteers information on what to expect from a Tandem placement, and how to use them effectively, particularly with regard to future job-hunting (e.g. by setting objectives, identifying strategic contacts). Partner organisations, such as the Brussels integration agency, Bon, are also invited to provide information and advice to participants in this regard. Importantly, former Tandem volunteers and host organisations are invited to shape and lead these sessions, to share their experiences and advice with newcomers to the initiative. In this way, engagement with Tandem is designed to outlast the two-week placement: indeed, the intention is for Tandem itself to be a space in which refugees can assume leadership and shape the initiative themselves.

This reflects the fact that Tandem is very much an initiative that is constantly evolving and developing, and that cooperation between refugees/asylum-seekers and ‘non-refugees’ is central to this growth. Feedback from the sessions is vital to this endeavour, and has indeed been a source of new members of the team itself.

The sessions are accompanied by an informal social moment, open to all and promoted amongst civil society networks, to build a community around Tandem by providing a regular space for refugees/asylum-seekers and others to contribute their ideas to Tandem’s development, and simply to meet one another in a social context – embodying the aim to encourage encounters between these ‘communities’. In this informal way, Tandem hopes also to inspire more active citizenship through creating opportunities for new initiatives to be borne from discussions at the sessions, ideally led by refugees.

Mentoring

Conscious of the importance of providing pastoral support to volunteers after a placement, and that the principal motivation for most individuals to engage with Tandem is to help their search for secure, paid employment, Tandem has teamed up with the Brussels-based NGO Duo for a Job. This organisation provides one-to-one, intergenerational mentoring focused on job-hunting, over a six-month period, to Brussels newcomers. Tandem is now encouraging all its volunteers, but particularly those who have completed placements, to register with Duo. Similarly, Duo promotes Tandem to those of its ‘mentees’ with a refugee background.

Challenges

Gender

Reviewing the profiles of the individuals who have registered to become Tandem volunteers, it is clear that the vast majority are male. This gender imbalance was apparent to the Tandem team following the very first wave of registrations in July, and efforts are being made to reach out to young refugee women as a particular priority (in the first instance, by reaching out to refugee women’s organisations); and similarly, to prioritise matching placements to women who have already registered.

Although Tandem has not undertaken specific research into the reasons for the low number of registrations by women, the team considers that this primarily reflects two issues. Firstly, the gender imbalance in the

number of individuals seeking asylum in Belgium: of the 35,476 asylum applications filed in Belgium in 2015, 70.8 % were filed by men.⁶ Secondly, cultural factors amongst the refugee communities with which Tandem is working mean women may neither be encouraged or willing to take up opportunities such as those offered by the initiative. Anecdotally, the team understands that fear and uncertainty about what a volunteer placement comprises, are key factors preventing some young women signing up. This will continue to be a priority issue for Tandem as the initiative evolves.

Criteria

Tandem does not impose any specific eligibility criteria on the individuals signing up to be volunteers, aside from the regularity of their status in Belgium (e.g. having an asylum application in process, or being a recognised refugee): Belgian law allows everyone legally in the country to volunteer. However, due to the nature of the organisations targeted by Tandem (Brussels-based, EU level non-profit organisations), and the context in which they work (non-manual, predominantly office-based), Tandem has primarily reached out to refugees/asylum-seekers with at least basic English-language proficiency. This is, in the first instance, a practical consideration to ensure an adequate level of communication between the host organisation and volunteer, and the volunteer's capacity to understand and carry out the work. In practice, this has meant that the majority of Tandem's pool of volunteers have either a professional background, or experience of tertiary education.

The initiative has received criticism that it may, therefore, not be addressing the most vulnerable individuals. Thus far, Tandem has relied upon refugee networks (e.g. Facebook groups) principally in the Syrian community for to promote its work, and members of the team who are refugees themselves are seeking to reach out to as wide an audience as possible. However, given that Tandem can be considered as a means by which volunteers can support their *return* to the job market, or build on their formal education/prior voluntary experience to enter it for the first time, and in this way, support their integration, the initiative is not necessarily designed specifically to address the needs of the most vulnerable (e.g. torture victims; those suffering trauma; unaccompanied minors) or cater to first order humanitarian concerns (e.g. food, accommodation). Given the nature of the initiative, the team considers that it cannot expect host organisations to provide – or be able to provide – the specialist support and care needed by very vulnerable individuals, and it would be negligent to put either party in this situation. Furthermore, given that the initiative is itself run by volunteers who do not have specific competences in, for example, psychosocial care, attempting to address such needs would arguably be neither responsible nor sustainable.

Future development

The refugees/asylum-seekers engaging with Tandem indicate informally that it is viewed positively and valued amongst their peers precisely because of its practical approach, and that it responds to a genuine need – albeit, with the recognition that paid employment, rather than volunteering, is the preferred solution. The fact that the initiative was established, functions, and is developing with the participation and equal input of refugees themselves, is a critical element here.

Efforts are also continually being made to improve the support provided to hosting organisations and volunteers, and ensure the placements offered are worthwhile for volunteers e.g. through developing better evaluation methods. Thus far, it is encouraging to note that the feedback from former volunteers and hosts has been very positive.

Nevertheless, challenges remain to delivering Tandem's primary aims. The immediate focus is to increase the number of hosting organisations, and expand to other sectors within the 'Brussels bubble' such as industry associations: this will help to secure placements for the refugee/asylum-seekers that have signed up, and improve the possibility that Tandem serves as a 'bridge' to employment. Requests are indeed constantly received from volunteers and organisations regarding the possibility for private sector organisations to develop paid Tandem traineeships, and this remains an area to be explored. But while the scope to develop new directions of work remains wide, mainly given the scope of need of the refugees with whom Tandem

6 From Belgium Asylum Statistics August 2016 from the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (see <http://www.cgra.be/en/news/asylum-statistics-august-2016>)

works, capacity constraints mean the initiative is aiming rather to establish strategic partnerships – such as with Duo for a Job – instead of duplicating existing initiatives or deviating from its primary activity, particularly given the relative youth of the initiative.

Moreover, Tandem needs first to ensure it is a sustainable endeavour, and building a functioning team of volunteers to coordinate and deliver its work, with adequate financial resources, is critical. An application for grant funding from a Belgian foundation has been submitted, to supplement the *ad hoc* fundraising activities that are enabling Tandem to cover operating costs such as website-hosting. The key financial objective at present is to ensure a budget sufficient to allow Tandem to provide an allowance to the refugees volunteering within its own coordinating team throughout 2017.

Recommendations for youth workers and youth organisations

Although Tandem is not a specifically youth-focused activity, the following points may be relevant to youth workers and youth organisations.

Youth workers

- Work with young, female refugees and asylum-seekers to identify and overcome barriers to their participation in initiatives such as Tandem.
- Work with non-traditional partners where possible to support the creation of practical initiatives to foster integration: e.g. apprenticeship/internship schemes with private sector organisations.
- Provide support for refugees/asylum-seekers to develop autonomously their own integration initiatives and promote these opportunities through social networks: e.g. via the provision of free workspaces; communications and IT workshops.
- Partner with private sector organisations and public unemployment agencies to develop traineeships, apprenticeships, and work experience opportunities to enable refugees/asylum-seekers to engage directly with potential employers.

Youth organisations

- Engage refugee/asylum-seeker volunteers via existing schemes, or proactively establish a placement scheme in cooperation with refugee (youth) organisations.
- Cooperate with other youth organisations to host volunteers jointly, where financial or other resource constraints impede capacity to host and deliver quality volunteer placements.
- Establish integration initiatives with the active participation of refugees and asylum-seekers from as early in the development process as possible, to ensure that respond to actual needs more directly.
- Focus on targeted, practical solutions when developing solutions to integration challenges.
- Create visibility for positive stories about refugees, their integration and their active participation in organisations/civic life e.g. via social media, communications, etc.